

By Msgr. Owen F. Campion

'Hero' Is Not the Word

Canonization process proceeding for Wichita priest

Hero is not a word often used to describe priests, but a band of veterans of the Korean War is quick to say that their hero, from the days of the war or any day, is a priest.

He was Father Emil Kapaun, the priest from the Diocese of Wichita who, as a chaplain in the United States Army, was captured by Chinese troops during the war and confined, with others in his unit, in dreadful conditions until he, as many of them, died.

His cause for canonization is beginning. One bishop advocating sainthood for the priest, and familiar with the process of canonization, said that Father Kapaun's case is quite unusual. So many witnesses, this bishop says, are not Catholics themselves. Some are not even Christians. A few are unbelievers.

All of them served with Father Kapaun and lived with him as a prisoner. He left upon them a profound impression of goodness, visible to them even though they themselves were not at the time, or are not now, religious.

Emil Kapaun was born on April 20, 1916, on Holy Thursday, to Enos and Elizabeth Kapaun, in Pilsen, a small, overwhelmingly Catholic farming community in East Central Kansas.

His parents were devout. They thought that the coincidence of his birth on Holy Thursday was not an accident. It augured for him a life in and for the Church and close to the Lord.

They were right. He was an average boy as he grew into adolescence and young manhood. He was an average farm boy, taking his place in the work of the farm. His leisure moments were similar to those of many another American farm boy. He fished in a nearby stream. He watched the animals.

One story about his youth is that once he took pity on a small bird that had been injured. He was tender and kind.

He also was tenacious and determined, traits that came to him naturally as the child of farmers who had to make their living from the soil at times when nature was not always accommodating.

True to whatever predisposition the day of his birth might have created for him, he spoke early about his wish one day to be a priest.

In his first year of high school, on Feb. 17, 1930, he wrote in his diary, "Many are called, but few are chosen. Is He calling you?"

Soon into his high school years, he resolved this question. He first applied to be a foreign missionary, asking to be accepted as a candidate for the Columban Fathers. His pastor,

however, asked him also to look at the diocesan priesthood. Young Kapaun did as the pastor suggested and in the end decided that he was inclined to be a diocesan priest.

So, as a diocesan seminarian, he was enrolled in the seminary at Conception Abbey, the Benedictine monastery in Missouri. There he studied all that students for the priesthood must study.

In addition to learning in his classes, he realized a much deeper, and more critical, lesson about the priesthood and about priests. Writing to cousins back in Kansas in 1940, he said that he had come to see that first and foremost a priest had to be a "living saint."

"Think what it means!" he wrote as he described the priest as celebrant at Mass. Concluding, in an affirmation of both his conviction of being given a priestly vocation and his total willingness to comply, he wrote, "To this I am called."

Thus he saw himself called to the priesthood, but to a priesthood in which he felt that he had to be a living saint.

These twin identities, one qualifying the other, in the last analysis tell the story of his life and of him as a person.

On June 9, 1940, Bishop Christian Winkelmann ordained Emil Kapaun a priest to serve the Diocese of Wichita. He certainly knew that he would be assigned as an assistant pastor in Southern Kansas, but, it is said, he was surprised when he read Bishop Winkelmann's letter sending him to his first assignment. He was to serve in his home parish, St. John Nepomucene, in Pilsen.

There, as celebrant, confessor, spiritual director, teacher and comrade, he saw the piety in his parishioners, all of whom he already knew. Knowing them well, he knew what actually was in their hearts and he knew their needs.

WWII Military Chaplain

At the same time, war by then was underway in Europe. Father Kapaun's German heritage on his father's side, and Czech on his mother's, led him to follow events. On Dec. 7, 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the young priest put it all together.

Evil is in the world, and it brings incalculable heartbreak and death in its wake. The love of Christ is the only response.

While, at least in terms of seniority in ordination, he preceded so many other men of his generation who themselves decided to become priests after reaching the same conclusion, learned while they served in World War II in combat.

With the country plunged into the war effort, and the Church making a mighty effort to do its part, young Father Kapaun volunteered to help the chaplain at a military base at Delavan, Kansas, not far from his home.

Twice a week, he drove to Delavan to minister to the troops. In time, he entered the Army itself as a chaplain.

First sent to a base in Georgia, he eventually went to the Chinese-Burmese-Indian theatre. In this area, he encountered not only allied sailors and soldiers, but Catholic missionaries as well. Many of these missionaries, often with nationalities at war with Japan, especially had suffered during the Japanese military occupation.

War or not, they were freely giving their lives to the Lord, as missionaries, in places far from home and amid the most trying of conditions.

They had to look their priestly vocations quite directly in the face. To be effective, to be at peace, they had to be living saints.

Finally, the war ended. In Asia, the war ended when Japan unconditionally surrendered. It was then that the Allies came together to divide the spoils. Little at the time was worthy of being called the spoils. Devastation had been universal and severe.

But, there was the future, and there was the land along with populations to be enlisted in many possible future pursuits.

All the Allies knew this. Several, exhausted by the war, in effect left the scene, the British, the Dutch, and the French. The old colonies of British Burma, now Myanmar, the Netherlands East Indies, now Indonesia, and French Indochina, now Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, never again were what they once had been to their European overlords.

The British quit Burma, and the Dutch left what became Indonesia. The French tried to hold Indochina, but finally they too left.

Europeans were not the only colonizers. Japan had overtaken, years before the war, Manchuria and the Korean peninsula.

The mishmash that had been these colonial empires was alluring to new potential masters, particularly with the victorious Soviet Union looking for opportunities to expand its place in the world by imposing Marxist Communism on new areas and new peoples.

In this tug of war, the Korean peninsula was divided. The South, to be called the "Republic of Korea," would be under Western, or actually American, domination. The North, to be the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," would dance to the Soviet tune.

It was placid, but it was anything but harmonious. Tensions reached a head when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950. President Harry S Truman, responding to treaty obligations with the South, reacted by sending American forces to forestall an invasion of the South by the North.

President Truman had no constitutional authority to wage war. It is a task assigned by the Constitution solely to Congress. So, he called his effort in Korea a "police action."

But, some police action it was. Thousands of Americans were deployed. Many were killed in action. Despite the word games, the United States was at war.

Father Kapaun was among the chaplains sent to Korea to serve the troops. For a while everything worked in favor of the South Koreans and their American protectors. In fact, not

only did this alliance drive the Communist North Koreans out of South Korea, but it pressed all the way to the Korean border with China.

Then, the bottom fell out. Surely fearing a complete end of Communism on the peninsula, China, by them Communist itself, poured its own troops into the fray. The American- South Korean forces were pushed back, almost into the surrounding seas.

It was at this time that Father Kapaun's unit was captured. With his comrades, he became a prisoner of war.

Prisoners of war are like any other prisoners. The greatest loss is freedom and the control of person. However, the Chinese-North Korean masters added special measures of horror to the lives of POWs.

It was in this horror that Father Kapaun was to spend the rest of the days of his life, and serve the rest of his priesthood.

It was in this time that he became a hero to his men and, to the believers among them, a saint.

To begin, winters are harsh in Korea, especially in the North. The prisoners had flimsy shelters and no comforts. They lived in the cold. Rations were limited and often contaminated. Not surprisingly, many took ill; many died.

For so many, the last sight of gentleness seen in this world was on the caring countenance of Father Kapaun.

His care was more than spiritual care. For many, he was the nurse, the only medical caregiver, and surely the only source of compassion. He traded his watch with a guard for a blanket that he cut apart to use to wrap the freezing feet of prisoners. He washed foul undergarments in the river. He cut steps in a steep hillside so that prisoners could climb to get water and not fall. He cleaned the latrines to spare weaker prisoners the chore.

For all, enduring the brutality of guards, who hated the prisoners, was a round-the-clock, unending challenge. Father Kapaun encouraged the men and he spoke up for them.

For Catholics in the prison, of course, he was so special because he was a priest. He absolved them, prayed for them, blessed them and reminded them that at the end of the day God's love would be with them.

The stories are many. Many are told in several books that have already been written. Forbidden to conduct religious services and without the essentials for Mass, he nevertheless defied the guards and led his men in prayer.

Father Kapaun himself, in time, took sick. He developed ulcers on his leg, created by emboli in the blood vessels. Regardless of pain or impairment in walking, he simply fashioned a walking stick and went about his errands of mercy and spiritual comfort.

Finally, the guards came to take him to the "hospital." He knew. Everyone knew. It was a death sentence. He held the empty pyx that he kept with him. Then, to his men, he said, "Tell them at home that I died a happy death."

Concerned that his loss might end spiritual care in the camp, he told his chaplain's assistant, "You know the prayers, Ralph. Keep up the services."

Concerned about a soldier in an invalid marriage, he said, "When you get back to Jersey, straighten your situation out."

Then to all, he said farewell. "I am going where I always have wanted to be. When I get up there, I will pray for all of you."

He died, at some time, somehow. Apparently several days later, the small daughter of a Chinese guard came to the Americans with a memento given her by Father Kapaun to take to his men. It was his pyx. His loving men kept it as a relic, and it is in Kansas now as a tangible memorial of the priest whom so many saw as a living saint. TP

MSGR. CAMPION is associate publisher of Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., and editor of The Priest magazine.